

# Checking Understanding

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In a standard language focus lesson following a PPP (present, practice, produce) or similar format, the target language (structure or vocabulary) is normally presented in context, then isolated and analysed. Analysis of the language consists of two sub-stages, often known as highlighting and concept checking.

**Highlighting** is taking the model sentence and showing, telling or eliciting what the problems are in terms of form, function, and phonology.

**Concept checking** is checking the understanding of difficult aspects of the target structure in terms of function and meaning. Concept checking is vital, since learners must fully understand the structure before any intensive practice of form and phonology is carried out.

- Ways of checking understanding
- Concept questions
- Some examples
- Learning to construct concept questions
- Conclusion

## Ways of checking understanding

Concept checking is normally achieved by the use of a set of questions designed to ensure comprehension of the target language, raise awareness of its problems, and to indicate to the teacher that the learners have fully understood.

The question '**Do you understand?**', or the remark '**OK?**' do not achieve any of these aims, and are unlikely to receive a truthful answers from all the learners. Concept questions are one way of checking understanding, but are often used in combination with other methods, often visual, depending on the nature of the target language involved. Here are some other methods:

- Time lines to establish tenses. Time lines are not a substitute for concept questions.
- Truth lines to establish probability e.g. must be / could be / might be / can't be.
- Reality lines to establish degree of reality or imagination e.g. conditional sentences
- Clines to show grades or scales e.g. yellow-amber-orange, frequency adverbs
- Pictures to distinguish between similar objects e.g. cup / mug, lane / road / highway
- Discrimination to check function and register e.g. Do I say 'hey!' to my boss?
- Negative checking e.g. Do I say 'I were'?
- Translation (where appropriate and possible).
- Extensions to consolidate understanding. Homework often reveals lack of understanding, as do guided practice exercises.

## Concept questions

Concept questions themselves are often difficult to construct since they involve clarifying function and meaning using simple language but not the target language itself.

Apart from their classroom value, thinking of good questions also helps inexperienced teachers to understand the complexities of form, function and meaning, and to practise grading their language. Some basic tips for good concept questions are:

- Make sure the questions are simple and that no difficult language is required to answer the question. Yes/no questions, either/or questions and simple 'wh' questions are particularly effective
- Don't use the new (target) grammar in your questions
- Don't use unfamiliar vocabulary
- Bring out basic concepts such as 'time' and 'tense' in your questions
- Use as many questions as possible to check various aspects of the language and to cover as many learners as possible.

### Some examples

These examples show how concept questions could be used to help differentiate between the main functions of the present simple and present continuous.

Target sentence: **Look! They're painting the wall**

Checking questions	
<b>Is it happening now?</b>	Yes
<b>Can you see it? Yes</b>	Yes
<b>Is the painting finished?</b>	No
<b>Are they painting now?</b>	Yes
<b>Is this the past, present or future?</b>	Present

Target sentence: **She's a shop assistant. She works in a shop**

Checking questions	
<b>Has she got a job?</b>	Yes
<b>Is she working now</b>	Don't know
<b>Does she work there every day?</b>	Yes
<b>Is this the past, present or future?</b>	Present, but also past and probably future.

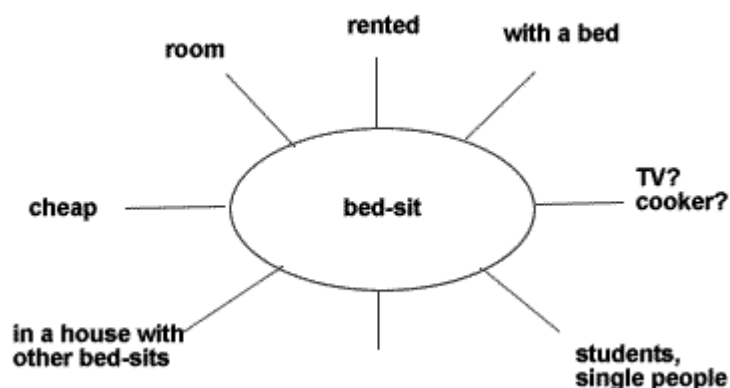
This example shows how concept questions can be used to clarify the meaning of more complex structures:

Target sentence: **If I won the lottery, I'd buy a new car**

Checking questions	
<b>Have I won the lottery?</b>	No
<b>Am I going to win the lottery?</b>	Probably not
<b>Am I going to buy a new car?</b>	Probably not
<b>Has he got a lottery ticket?</b>	Maybe
<b>Is this real, or imaginary?</b>	Imaginary

## Learning to construct concept questions

One way of beginning to think about concept questions is to break the meaning of a word or structure into components. A vocabulary item might be diagrammatically represented. Here is an example of the concepts included in the word **'bed-sit'**



Questions may be of different types:

- Yes/no questions. ***'Is a bed-sit a room?', 'Are there other rooms in the house?', 'Can you sleep in it?'***
- 50/50 chance questions. ***'Is it a room or a building?', 'Is it cheap or expensive?' 'Do you buy it or pay money every week or month?'***
- Information questions. ***'Who lives in it?', 'How many people live in it?'***
- Discrimination questions. ***'Do you only sleep in it?', 'Can you cook a meal in it?', 'Is it the same as a flat?'***
- Shared experience questions. ***'Is there a bed-sit in this building?'***
- Life experience/culture questions. ***'Have you ever lived in a bed-sit?' 'Are their bed-sits in your city/country?'***
- Remember that the answers ***'sometimes', 'it depends'*** and ***'I don't know'*** can tell you as much as ***'yes' or 'no'***.

Another way of constructing concept questions is by writing a sentence containing all the elements of the concept, from which questions can be formed. This is a useful method when distinguishing between two functions of the same structure, particularly where those functions would be expressed by different forms or tenses in other languages. For example:

- ***'He's been eating garlic.'***  
**Concept:** He isn't eating garlic now, and I didn't see him eating it, but I know he was eating garlic because I can smell it.
- ***'Harry's been working here for two years.'***  
**Concept:** He started working here two years ago, he's still working here, and he'll probably continue working here.

## Conclusion

The value of concept questions should not be underestimated, but many teachers either forget to use them or find them difficult to construct. Teachers are often satisfied that the

learners 'seem to understand' on the basis of their performance in practice exercises. A few important points to remember are:

- Concept questions are particularly valuable after the presentation and explanation of an item, and may be asked at any stage during a lesson. They are valuable after guided practice, particularly if the learners seem not to have grasped the target language fully, and at the end of a lesson, as a final check and review.
- Time lines and other devices are not substitutes for concept questions. They are aids to explanation, but do not necessarily check understanding. Concept questions, however, may be used to elicit a timeline from the learners.
- Concept questions are particularly valuable where a concept does not exist, or is different in the mother tongue (e.g. the perfect aspect, ways of expressing the future), and where a language item is culturally loaded as in the case of the word 'subway' which has very different meanings in British and American English. In such cases, concept questions often form part of the initial teaching process.
- Concept questions are also useful for raising awareness of association and connotation, and for drawing attention to collocations and fixed expressions. They are also good listening practice for learners, and can even lead on to class activities such as guessing games in which the learners write their own questions.
- The teacher does not have to concept check every new item. In many cases, function and meaning are clear because the language has been presented in a meaningful context.
- When learners perform poorly in guided or less guided practice, it is often because they are not clear about the function or meaning of the target language. This may well be because the teacher has asked 'do you understand?' or 'is that clear' rather than good concept questions.

This article published: 8th June, 2006

### **Further reading**

Graham Workman - **Concept Questions And Time Lines**; Chadburn Publishing, 2006.

[http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/methodology/check\\_understand.shtml#one](http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/methodology/check_understand.shtml#one)

# Conveying meaning

*Nik Peachey, British Council*

When teaching any language whether it is a word, a phrase or a verb form, at some point it will be essential to convey and check that your students have understood the meaning. In most classrooms this is most commonly done through translation by the teacher or students, but is this really the best way? In this article I'd like to share some alternative methods which I have used in my teaching.

- Problems with translation
- Moving away from translation
- Possible problems
- Conclusion

## Problems with translation

All though it is quick and simple, there are many possible problems with relying on translation.

- The word you want to translate to doesn't always cover the same range of meaning and connotation of the target word.
- Some structures or verb forms that exist in English either don't exist in other languages or the parallel form carries either additional or less meaning.
- Using translation can make students very teacher / dictionary dependent.
- By relying on translation, students don't develop the 'real world' strategies, which could help them to negotiate meaning and communicate when they need to make themselves understood or to understand someone who doesn't share their language.

## Moving away from translation

Here are some methods I have used to in attempting to move away from dependence on translation.

- **Mime.** This includes noises or gestures. Some words particularly actions are easy and quick to mime.
  - This can actually make lesson much more enjoyable too, especially if you get the students used to miming words.
- **Pictures.** This includes photos and drawings. These are very useful for when the words you are trying to teach are objects. Doing a quick drawing on the board can very simply convey the meaning of words that come up unexpectedly in class.
  - Again, if you get students to do the drawing too, then this can make the class more memorable and can be made a regular revision feature of your lessons. **Time lines** are also a great way of conveying the meaning of different verb tenses.
- **Clines.** These are graphs showing degree and they can be really useful for sets of words like, love, hate, don't mind, fond of, detest, enjoy or things like adverbs of frequency. They rely on students' existing knowledge and extend that knowledge.
  - If you know that your students understand love and hate then you can place these at extremes on the graph and get your students to decide where the other words in the set should be in relation to those.

- **Realia** or the real thing. This relies on the words you are teaching being objects and you being able to bring that object into class, but it can be really effective for students who are tactile learners and who need to touch.
  - This can be particularly effective for teaching words like fluffy, rough, smooth, furry, hairy, which have very subtle differences which would be hard to explain.
- **Dictionary.** A mono lingual dictionary can be really useful in helping to build up your learners independence.
  - Using a monolingual dictionary well is a skill and one that you may well need to work on in order to help your students get the best out of it.
- **Explanation.** Being able to explain what a word means in the target language can be a really useful skill for students.
  - By giving students concise and accurate explanations of words we can help them to develop the ability to explain words that they want to know.
- **Synonyms / Antonyms.** Giving opposite words or similar words can be a very quick way of conveying meaning, but you will need to be careful.
  - Using thin as a synonym for skinny can be quite effective, but there is still a difference in connotation and you'll need to consider whether and how you deal with these slight differences in meaning.
- **Word formation** or to be accurate breaking down complex words to their root parts. This method can also help students to understand how some of the suffixes and morphemes of the language work.
  - The word 'misunderstanding' can be divided into three parts; the route (understand), its prefix (mis) and the 'ing' at the end. By breaking words down in this way students learn more about the language than the word itself and can start to apply this knowledge to other words they want to use.
- **Context.** This could be within a written text, audio, video or even a play and is by far one of the most useful and powerful ways to convey meaning.
  - If students are able to deduce the meaning of a word or phrase through the context in which they see or hear it, then they are well on the road to becoming independent learners.

### Possible problems

Of course using the techniques above takes time and planning and there are always likely to be words that 'come up' unexpectedly in class when it will be just more economical to use translation. There is also the fact that you may have to battle against your students' expectations.

- If they are used to having the teacher give them translations of every new word or phrase they learn, then they might not readily take to having to do some of the thinking work for themselves. If this is the case, you might want to start introducing these methods gradually by using them as part of revision games.
- If, as is the case with many learners, they are really uncomfortable with not having a translation to match their new language points against, you could try telling them that you will give them translations for new words at the end of the class which will also act as a good way to revise any new language which has come up in the class.

### Conclusion

Although many of these ways of conveying meaning may be more time consuming and require more planning than translating words, I believe by using them we are in the long term making better learners of our students. We are not only teaching them words and

phrases, but the ability to convey and understand new meaning within the framework of the language they want to learn. This will make them more independent learners and better able to cope when the time comes for them to actually use the language in the 'real world'.

*This article published: 8th June, 2005*

[http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/methodology/convey\\_meaning.shtml](http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/methodology/convey_meaning.shtml)

# Time lines

*Gareth Rees, teacher, trainer, London Metropolitan University, UK*

"I am sorry, I don't understand **'temporary repeated action'**, and why you have said **'Present consequence of a completed event in the past at an unspecified time or a state which commenced at a point of time in the past and continues until the present time and in all likelihood will continue into the future time'**?  
I haven't understood. Please help me!"

The language used by teachers to explain time reference, particularly of verb forms, can be confusing for the students. Timelines are neat devices that can be used to clarify our teaching language. Timelines enable the communication of sophisticated concepts to the lowest level of learner, and can prompt sophisticated discussion amongst higher level learners.

This article is a basic introduction to timelines. Later articles will discuss when to use timelines in class, concept checking, activities and strategies that use timelines and their potential drawbacks. This introductory article covers the following areas.

- What is a timeline?
- Why use timelines?
- What does a timeline look like?
  - The basics
  - Symbols
  - Examples
- Conclusion

## What is a timeline?

One of the keys to learning a language is learning how that language refers to, and describes, time and events, or states, that occur in the realm of time. In English, this reference to time is most commonly described by the verb, in its various tenses and aspects. Unfortunately, when learning a language, it is at times difficult to understand the concepts that are given as explanation.

- Timelines are diagrams that illustrate the reference to time made by a given piece of language. They are used to show how a particular language item (often a verb in a particular tense and aspect) places particular events or situations in time and in relation to other events.

## Why use timelines?

The concepts which underline time reference in a language are often difficult to explain using controlled language and are often linguistically difficult to understand. Timelines are used to explain language in the more universal form of pictures, diagrams and symbols. Most people will follow the direction indicated by an arrow.

Timelines are used to:

- Simplify linguistic explanation
- Reinforce the understanding of a concept



- Illustrate the differences between verb forms and other language items
- Help students with a visual learning style
- Provide a reference point for students
- Encourage awareness of how language refers to time in different ways

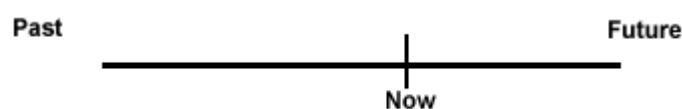
### What does a timeline look like?

There are no set rules for the appearance of timelines, rather, there is a common sense convention which will be described below. Teachers will have their own idiosyncrasies and develop their own micro styles (representing time through diagrams is never going to be a standard affair), however, the similarities between the timelines used in Room 12 in London and Room 14 in Shanghai are greater than the differences.

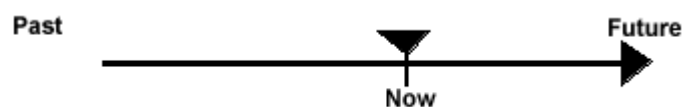
### The basics

A horizontal line represents the basic line of time. The left end of the line is the first point in time, the right end is the final point in time. Thus, time is deemed to move forward as the line moves from left to right.

This line is usually marked with a point that represents now. Thus, the timeline is divided into the past and the future.



To emphasise the direction of time, the line may be capped with an arrowhead. I also like to represent **Now** with a triangle, as below.

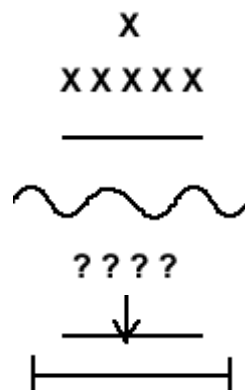


This simple template can then be added to in order to show everything from the difference between the words before and after and the meaning of the future perfect continuous!

### Symbols

The following is a summary of the common symbols used on timelines

- A single event or action
- A repeated action or habit
- A permanent state or situation
- A temporary state, situation or repeated/continuous action
- Exact time of event is unknown
- A point in time
- A period in time



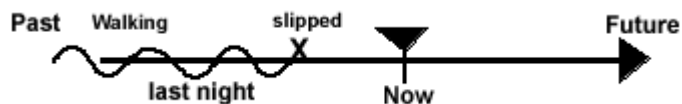
## Examples

Here are some timeline examples demonstrating the use of these symbols.

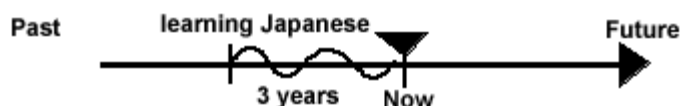
- Yesterday, I met Bob in the bank, quite by chance.



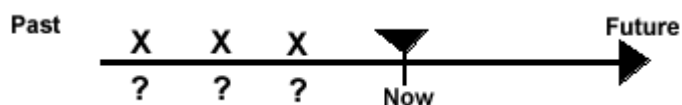
- Last night, I was walking home when I slipped on the icy path



- I have been learning Japanese for three years.



- I have been to New Zealand, Iceland and Taiwan.



- I get up at seven o'clock every day.



## Conclusion

These examples should show how the symbols act to illustrate a sentence or phrase. In the second article you will see how to use these diagrams in class, in particular how to use them to check the understanding of key concepts.

*This article published: 19th April, 2005*

<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/methodology/time.shtml>